DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 309 EC 192 738

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TITLE Attitudes of University Students Toward Persons with Specific Handicaps.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 22p.; For related documents, see EC 192 737-739.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Disabilities; Emotional Disturbances; Higher Education; *Mainstreaming; *Peer Acceptance; Physical Disabilities; Sex Differences; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The paper reports the results of a study which assessed the attitudes of 220 University of Minnesota (Duluth) undergraduates toward handicapped persons in a situational context. The Situational Attitude Scale--Handicapped (Modified) which assesses attitudes toward persons who are blind, wheelchair-bound, deaf, emotionally disturbed, or not handicapped was administered to subjects (94% of whom reported having had handicapped students in their classes). Generally, more negative attitudes were expressed toward emotionally disturbed individuals than toward physically handicapped individuals in close personal situations. More positive attitudes were expressed toward persons who had no handicap or were deaf. No significant differences were associated with a participant's age, sex, or experience with mainstreamed handicapped students in their classes. (Author/DB)

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ATTITUDES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TOWARD PERSONS WITH SPECIFIC HANDICAPS

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1984

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a study which assessed the attitudes of university students toward handicapped persons in a situational context.

Abstract

This article reports the results of a study which assessed the attitudes of university students toward handicapped persons in a situational context. Two hundred and twenty University of Minnesota, Duluth undergraduates completed a modified and expanded version of the Situational Attitude Scale-Handicapped (Stovall & Sedlacek, 1981) which assessed attitudes toward persons who are blind, wheelchair-bound, deaf, emotionally disturbed, or not handicapped. Generally, more negative attitudes were expressed toward emotionally disturbed individuals than toward physically handicapped individuals in close personal situations. More positive attitudes were expressed toward persons who had no handicap or were deaf. No significant differences were associated with the participants' sex, age, or experience with mainstreamed handicapped students in their classes.

Attitudes of University Students toward Persons with Specific Handicaps

Many obstacles have been overcome in an effort to insure equal opportunities for handicapped persons. While some divergence may exist in determining how institutions of higher education might best respond to the challenge of Public Laws 93-112 and 94-142, the Rehabilitation Acts of 1973 and 1974, most post-secondary organizations have commenced efforts to accommodate the physical needs of this unique population of students.

Unfortunately, only a limited amount of attention has focused on issues which impact on these handicapped students once they begin attending classes (Babbitt & Thompson, 1981). Negative attitudes held toward certain groups in society have been consistently linked with a lack of social acceptance or interaction and with interpersonal rejection (Grier & Cobbs, 1980; Voeltz, 1980; Stovall & Sedlacek, 1981). In fact, a number of writers have compared the ostracism and rejection faced by handicapped persons with the attitudes held by many members of our society toward racial and religious minorities and women (Chesler, 1965; Stovall & Sedlacek, 1981).

As more handicapped students with differing disabilities enroll in colleges and universities, the need to provide them with a supportive environment increases. The attitudes of

nonhandicapped students toward handicapped students are a crucial aspect of the campus environment and individual acceptance.

Most studies of attitudes toward handicapped or disabled persons use the terms "handicapped" or "disabled" in the context of a generalized condition. Only a limited number of studies have appeared in the literature regarding attitudes of students toward persons with "specific" handicaps. The available investigations have been restricted to assessment of attitudes regarding only one or two impairments, such as blind and wheelchair-bound (Stovall & Sedlacek, 1981; Byrd & Rhoden, 1981). There is some evidence to suggest that negative attitudes regarding handicapped persons can have an impact on the general perception of a person (Goffman, 1963; Wright, 1964). Conclusions by other researchers argue that there simply is no uniformity in defining the term "disabled," thereby making the study of attitudes difficult (Smits, Conine & Edwards, 1971).

Proximity and the extent of contact seem to be closely related to attitudes toward handicapped persons in previous research. The study by Siller (1963) indicated that closeness in an interpersonal situation affected attitudes. Yuker (1965) noticed that a positive attitude toward persons with physical disabilities was related to the level and degree of previous contact. With more

handicapped students being mainstreamed in recent years, one might assume that an outcome of the increased contact would be more positive attitudes by the nonhandicapped students. However, no studies were located which examined the effects of mainstreaming in elementary or secondary schools on university students.

The literature on differences by sex in attitudes toward persons with handicaps is limited, especially among university students. In the study by Stovall and Sedlacek (1981), females generally expressed more positive attitudes than males expressed toward persons with handicaps. No studies were located which considered age of the university students in relation to attitudes.

The present study was designed to assess the attitudes of university students toward persons with handicaps. Attitudes toward persons who are blind, wheelchair-bound, deaf, emotionally disturbed, or not handicapped were compared. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. Do attitudes of university students toward persons with a handicap differ?

2. Does the type of handicap influence attitudes in a positive or negative direction?

3. Is the age or sex of students a factor associated with their attitudes toward persons with a handicap?

4. Is there a difference in attitudes between participants who have been in classes where students with handicaps were mainstreamed as compared to participants who were not in mainstreamed classes?

A research design previously used to measure the attitudes of university students toward selected physical handicaps (Stovall & Sedlecek, 1981) was adapted for the present study.

Method

Participants

The pilot study sample consisted of 49 undergraduate students. The full study sample consisted of 220 undergraduate students who completed the data-collection instrument during a general psychology course. The participants included 115 males and 105 females; ages of participants ranged from 18 to 39, with 93% of the participants under the age of 25 years.

The participants had experienced having handicapped students mainstreamed into their classes with increasing frequency throughout their years of education. Nearly half the participants (46.7%) reported having had handicapped students in their elementary classes, nearly two-thirds (65.1%) in junior high school,

three-fourths (74.4%) in senior high school, and 94% of the participants reported having students with handicaps in their university classes.

Instrument

The Situational Attitude Scale - Handicapped (SAS-H) developed by Stovall and Sedlacek (1981) was used as the basis for developing the instrument used in the present study. The SAS-H is composed of 10 personal and social situations. Each situation represents an encounter or social interaction where a handicap might be important in an individual's reaction to the situation. Each situation contains 10 bipolar semantic differential scales, making a total of 100 items.

The original versions of the SAS-H were modified and expanded to include five forms, hereafter referred to as the Situational Attitude Scale - Handicapped Modified (SAS-HM). Forms A, B and C were developed by Stovall and Sedlacek; Forms D and E were modifications developed by the present research team. Each of the forms were similar except that a word identifying a handicap was inserted into each situation in four of the forms. Form A (neutral) did not specify a handicap, Form B specified blind, Form C specified wheelchair bound, Form D specified deaf and Form E specified emotionally disturbed (see Table 1). All forms of the

SAS-HM were followed by a demographic questionnaire developed by the present research team.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

The pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability for the SAS-HM. Cronbach's alpha was used to test for internal consistency (.96). Analysis of the pilot study data using analysis of variance indicated significant differences in attitudes toward persons with handicaps in a situational context. These findings indicated the hypotheses warranted further testing with a larger sample. The five forms of the SAS-HM were then administered with random assignment to 220 students during one class period.

Data were analyzed by analysis of variance comparing forms using a .05 level of significance. Two-way analysis of variance was used to test the demographic variables of sex, age, and experience with mainstreaming.

Results

Overall Attitudes

Differences in attitudes toward handicapped persons were measured by comparing responses to SAS-HM in Form A (neutral), Form

B (blind), Form C (wheelchair), Form D (deaf) and Form E (emotionally disturbed). Significant differences in attitudes occurred in 58 out of 100 items.

Significant differences occurred in the majority of the items in six situations. The situations included being a student next to you in class (Situation I), asking sister to marry (III), new roommate (IV), student insists on receiving library help (VI), student offers help (VII), and being asked out on a date (VIII). In these situations, participants generally expressed negative attitudes toward encounters or social interactions requiring close, personal contact with persons having handicaps. Words such as bad, nervous, unsafe, angry, and mad were used to describe their negative feelings.

For the remaining four situations which did not suggest close or personal contact, very few differences in attitudes were found. Words such as happy, hope, fine, excited, and nice were used to express positive feelings in situations where a student was accepted at a university (II), hired in a campus office (V), involved in a conversation (IX) or met at a party (X).

These findings generally confirm and support the research conducted by Stovall and Sedlacek (1981) regarding negative attitudes toward persons who are blind or in wheelchairs. The

findings also support the research conducted by Siller (1963) on the importance of social distance in the measurement of attitudes toward the disabled. However, the data in this study provide more comprehensive findings comparing attitudes toward additional specific handicaps.

Findings Regarding Specific Handicaps

Participants expressed more negative attitudes toward persons who were emotionally disturbed than toward persons with physical or no handicaps. However, participants did express more positive attitudes toward handicapped people who insist on receiving library help. Participants generally expressed the most positive attitudes in all situations toward persons who had no handicap or were deaf.

Demographic Variables

Data were analyzed using two-way analysis of variance to determine the association of attitudes toward handicapped persons with demographic variables. This procedure did not produce significant findings associating attitudes with sex of participants. This contrasts with the findings of Stovall and Sedlacek (1981). No significant findings were associated with the age of participants or with their experience with mainstreaming. There was no interaction indicated with age, sex or mainstreaming (see Tables 2-4).

Insert Tables 2-4 about here

The demographic questionnaire included items in which participants rated aspects of their high school experience. Over three-fourths (79%) of the participants rated their preparation for interpersonal communication as "very well" or "fairly well". However, when asked to rate how well their high school has prepared them to interact with handicapped persons, two-thirds (67.1%) rated their preparation in this area as "poor"; only one-third responded "fairly well" or "very well".

Discussion

This article supports and extends the findings of the research conducted by other writers regarding the environment many handicapped students can anticipate on the college campus. Clearly, negative attitudes exist among university students toward interacting with handicapped persons in situations involving close contact. In fact, interpersonal contact between handicapped and nonhandicapped students will most likely be limited to short, informal conversations in offices, classrooms, or the library.

Since so many students hold these negative attitudes toward handicapped persons, many of the handicapped students are likely

to feel socially rejected and experience difficulty developing relationships with nonhandicapped students which require more intimate and lengthy contact, e.g., dating, sharing a room, etc. Consequently, handicapped students will be less likely to involve themselves in other college activities, such as professional organizations and student government assemblies, which facilitate their full participation in societal roles. Moreover, this study also points out that different kinds of handicaps prompt different kinds of responses from normal populations. Nowhere is this more striking than between deaf students and those with emotional impairments. Generally, students seemed more positive toward the deaf than the emotionally disturbed persons. This may result from a tendency to perceive deafness as organic, irreversible and beyond the individual's control, while emotionally disturbed persons are seen as people who have not been able to cope with events encountered in everyday life, e.g., stress, loss of significant others, or drug use.

It also appears that mainstreaming handicapped students with their nonhandicapped peers will not automatically produce positive attitudes toward handicapped persons. Additional steps must be taken on the college campus to insure positive interaction between nonhandicapped and handicapped persons, or these negative attitudes may become even further entrenched (Amir, 1969).

There are several important implications for university personnel and students.

1. College administrators, faculty, counselors and students need to be made aware of the extent to which attitudes toward handicapped persons can influence adjustment to college and later life. Department and staff meetings could be used as opportunities to facilitate dialogue and planning for the arrival and continuance of handicapped students at the university.

2. Although additional studies are warranted to ferret out the causes of attitudes toward handicapped students, there is enough evidence available to support establishing ongoing counseling-discussion groups through university counseling centers. The purpose of these groups would be to promote positive interactions between handicapped and nonhandicapped students. Counselors facilitating either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups should focus on the reaction of nonhandicapped students, instructors, and administrators toward individuals with handicapping conditions. Further, counselors should be alert to the impact of others' reactions on the way the handicapped persons feel about themselves. Heterogeneous groups could focus on having nonhandicapped and handicapped persons share their perceptions of each other. The groups would also provide an opportunity for nonhandicapped persons to experience an awareness of what it is like to have a particular handicap.

3. Specific information regarding the problems confronted by handicapped individuals in a wide range of everyday situations need to be addressed through required coursework, student orientation programs and easily accessible literature. By translating sentiments into action programs, professionals truly convey their concern for the acceptance and success of handicapped students on the college campus.

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Table 1

Selected Situations from SAS-HM

Five forms of the SAS-HM were used in the study. The same situations were described in each form. Selected situations in Form B (blind) are listed below. (Complete version is available by contacting the authors.)

I. A blind student is seated next to you in class.

II. You learn that a blind student is accepted to a university and you are not.

III. A blind man asks your sister to marry him.

IV. You learn that you have a new roommate who is blind.

V. A blind student is hired as a student aid in a campus office instead of you.

VI. A blind student insists on receiving your help in getting a book from the library.

VII. In one of your classes, a blind student offers to help you you with an assignment that you are having difficulty with.

VIII. You get asked out on a date by a blind person.

IX. You meet a blind person who tells you about having "mysterious, psychic experiences."

X. A blind person you meet at a party talks to you about being "different from most people", and "in some ways, gifted."

Table 2

Analysis of Variance: Score by Handicap, Sex

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif of F
Main effects	86059	5	17212	5.7	.001
Handicap	78269	4	19567	6.4	.001
Sex	7275	1	7275	2.4	NS
Two-way interaction					
Handicap-sex	1898	4	474	.2	NS
Residual	639420	210	3045		
Total	727376	219	3321		

Table 3

Analysis of Variance: Score by Handicap, Age

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif of F
Main effects	82861	8	10358	3.3	.001
Handicap	80893	4	20223	6.5	.001
Age	1419	4	355	.1	NS
Two-way interaction					
Handicap-age	35491	15	2366	.8	NS
Residual	613239	196	3129		
Total	731591	219	3341		

Table 4

Analysis of Variance: Score by Handicap, Mainstreamed

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif of F
Main effects	82152	5	16430	5.4	.001
Handicap	81900	4	20475	6.8	.001
Mainstreamed	613	1	613	.2	NS
Two-way interaction					
Handicap-mainstreamed	7598	4	1900	.6	NS
Residual	642910	212	3033		
Total	732660	221	3315		